

The New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

Thematic Paper and Call for Panels

The Third Joint Conference of the German Sociological Association, the Austrian Sociological Association and the Swiss Sociological Association will be held at Innsbruck University from 29 September 2011 to 1 October 2011

Modern society was viewed by Enlightenment thinkers as a project for integration under the banner of reason: A growing public would enlighten itself within the public assemblies (including parliaments) of Enlightenment societies, emerge from its “self-incurred immaturity”, govern itself in constituted nation states, exchange experiences in the Kantian “federation of nations” as “world citizenry”, and gradually extend the ambit of international law. In accordance with this view, the political public sphere plays a central role in the blueprint for democratic society. It provides the means by which problems that are universally acknowledged as requiring resolution are recognised. It serves to control the constitutional state, and it is both the condition of legitimacy for the constitutional state and the constitutional framework of the sovereign people. The political public sphere thus functions as a forum, as a controller and legitimator, and as an integrator.

- *Forum*: By representing the context in which the problematisation of issues is exposed, the political public sphere – whose many arenas are linked through communication flows and which is supported by the basic rights of freedom of domicile, freedom of assembly, and freedom of opinion and of the press – is the basis for a justifiable expectation of rationality when it comes to the selection and handling of problems.
- *Legitimation and control*: By ensuring the regulation and legitimation of political power and of institutionalised procedures – and likewise supported by the basic civil rights, including suffrage – the political public sphere enables democratic self-regulation.
- *Integration*: By rendering society observable, the arena of the political public sphere facilitates the capacity of citizens to perceive themselves as members of a society that is able to solve problems in a democratic manner.

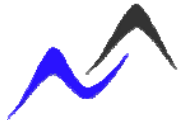
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In the light of these functions, the political public sphere must ensure that men, and subsequently women, have a pre-political disposition to participate in democracy: that is, they have expectations regarding the relative rationality of problem selection and problem solving and safeguarding the legitimacy of constitutional institutions, and share a belief in commonality that ensures civic allegiance to majority-minority decisions and redistribution of resources.

In accordance with this connotation of the political public sphere, the modern age is characterised by two traditions of criticism of the political public sphere in the nation state as it actually exists. The classical liberal critique of the public sphere is directed at different forms of self-empowerment by the state. For example, the state withdraws from the public sphere citing reasons of state and protects its dominion by means of state secrets, or the state actually reshapes the public sphere and in addition to the use of state secrets also assumes power of definition.

The second critical tradition rightly broke away from this exclusive fixation on the relationship between the state and the public sphere and, in its more advanced forms (e.g., culture industry theory and critical theory's thesis of the refeudalisation of the public sphere), deals with both the concentration of power between the state, the political parties and organised private interests, and the bedazzlement of citizens through the substitution of the custom of civic discourse with commercially oriented entertainment.

Neither tradition of critique of the public sphere is able to adequately capture three essential developments since the 1980s:

First, the political public sphere constituted by the nation state has lost contact with the globalisation processes that are increasing the political necessity for regulation beyond the boundaries of the nation state. The elimination of barriers tying economics to national economies and the growth in transnational multilevel policy-making without a public sphere point to the need for a dissolution of the boundaries around democracies, while the immigration processes driven by globalisation evidence the need for an internal expansion of democratic participation if the fundamental value of democratic self-regulation is to remain a feature of the modern age.

Second, the bearers of long-term oriented public communication – the media organisations – have disembedded themselves from their original environments in intermediate organisations such as political parties, associations, churches and socially and morally integrated publishing dynasties, and are now commercial enterprises with arbitrary sources of capital and corresponding demands regarding returns. The dual role assumed by broadcasting has intensified this differentiation of a media system that in the interest of optimising the amount of attention it receives now targets the mode of public communication using new logics of selection, interpretation and performance at

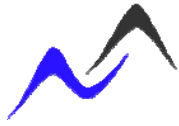
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media consumers instead of a public of citizens, and compels political actors to comply with the new logics of media-based communication.

Third, digitalisation has destroyed the business models of the classical leading media of the political public sphere – regional and national newspapers. The regional press, especially, is in deep crisis, while quality newspapers (which significantly define the horizon of discourse of political communication on matters of regulation) are also struggling to survive. The linear medium of television will not be able to stand guarantor for the political journalism of newspapers.

The social sciences have studied these developments to differing degrees. Looking at the process of European integration from the point of view of the nation state, scholars have responded to the elimination of economic and political boundaries by exploring the genesis of the European public sphere and European identity. Research on medialisatation and media governance as well as cultural theory studies have been the response to the development of an independent media system, while the major crisis in the leading media of the political public sphere has been mainly left in the hands of (media) economic studies. Nonetheless, researchers have dealt intensively with digital media, although they have not given adequate consideration to the basic question regarding the development of the political public sphere as an arena pertaining to the whole of society.

The joint conference of the German, Austrian and Swiss Sociological Associations will explore these developments in both **plenary sessions** and **numerous panels**, which will be recruited on the basis of an **open Call for Panels**. The following plenary sessions are planned:

Plenary 1: Boundaries and the end of boundaries to the political public sphere

Plenary 2: Legitimation and the legitimacy deficits of the social order

Plenary 3: Media logics and political communication

Plenary 4: Regulation without a public

This **Call for Panels** invites all sociologists, as well as colleagues from neighbouring disciplines in the social sciences, to participate in the conference by contributing either to a plenary session or to a panel, or – the specific invitation in this first announcement – by organising a panel.

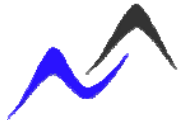
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(1) In the first round we call for the proposal of topics for the organisation of **panel sessions**.

- The closing date for proposals is **1 November 2010**
- Please send proposals by email to info@soziologie2011.eu (Frank Welz, Innsbruck)
- Length of proposal in characters: not specified
- Please also name the responsible organisers and/or jury members relating to your proposal.

(2) Following the receipt of the above date, a conference programme will be compiled on the basis of the proposals for panel sessions and this will be distributed as a **Call for Papers** in mid-November (for presentations for plenary sessions and panels; closing date: 1 April 2011).

Up-to-date details are available on the conference web site: www.soziologie2011.eu.

Yours sincerely,

Organisational team from the three associations for the “Three-Nation Conference 2011”.

Christian Fleck
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